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ABSTRACT

College-level history courses can be improved by including instruction about social history, particularly the leisure time activities of the dominant cultural group. Paris of the late 19th century had the well-deserved reputation of being the pleasure capital of Europe. This reputation developed in spite of the disparity that existed between the wealth and high cultural achievements on one hand, and urban squalor and poverty on the other. This environment gave life to new night clubs and sophisticated cabarets which sprang up in Paris in the 1880s. This paper describes the cabaret life of Paris of that period, and pays particular attention to the "Chat Noir," the first cabaret to inspire the cabaret fanaticism that swept across Europe at this time. (DB)

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The Cabaret in Paris Life Fin-de-Siècle

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The Cabaret in Paris Life Fin-de-Siècle

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Paris of the late nineteenth century was indeed the city of contrasts: the dying aristocracy and growing bourgeoisie; the traditional snobbish salon and the emerging popular café-concerts (café-concs); the city of splendid exhibitions and architectural innovations, and the urban dump of squalor and human desolation; the brilliant metropolis of art and artistic attraction, and the political arena of opposing forces; it was the city of expansion, of fashionable boulevards, homes, and cafés for the mondains, but it was the capital of vice, behind closed doors and extensive solicitation for the common pleasures in the streets. Despite that, Paris did live up to the well-earned reputation of being the pleasure capital of Europe. Even so, under the glitter and aurore there seethed in the streets, in the hovels, and in the dark corners of shanties a climate of hope and bitterness shadowed by the memory of a century of revolution and social struggles. This was the spirit that found its apparition and expression in the new night clubs and sophisticated cabarets that had sprung up in Paris since the 1880's. It was at a café where a boisterous, mixed public could hear popular singers for the minimum price of a drink or two.

Montmartre, a small village beyond the confines of Paris, on ((la butte sacrée)), the home of the low-culture, had been notorious since the 18th century for its great number of cabarets, taverns, and dance halls. With the addition of wine shops there came also many social outcasts--prostitutes, thieves, smugglers, pimps, singers, gypsies, and dancers. By the end of the nineteenth century, the district was a hive of Parisian night life with its dance and music halls and its café-concerts where working people could hear songs of their liking.

It was in this environment that the Chat Noir was born. It was one of the first cabarets artistiques created by Rodolphe Salis, a former Art student and "bohemian." Rodolphe Salis, Baron de la Tour de Naintre, son of a wealthy brewer, was an unknown painter, and an undiscovered poet; finally, he decided to open a café to earn a living for himself and his wife. He chose a location near the Cabaret de la Grande Pinte, a well-known establishment frequented by artists, on Avenue Trudaine. One day, by chance, he saw a cat perched on a street lamp; he picked up the cat and took it home with him. It occurred to him to name his café after this short-haired pet. Salis asked a friend, Adolphe Willette, to paint a picture of the cat which Salis hung in the window; thus, the Chat Noir was named!

Salis decided to decorate his establishment in the early seventeenth century style of Louis XIII with pewter, copper pans and pots, medieval arms, dark oak chairs and tables, church candelabra, old doors, tapestries and wooden panels. The café was divided into two rooms, one for artists or habitual customers and one for the general public. The inner room soon became

known as the "Institut", and Salis designated it as the spot only for the intellects. This would soon expand into a shop next door, so numerous were those habitués who preferred the inner sanctorum. Salis required that his waiters dress in academician's robes worn by members of the prestigious French Academy...green brocaded coats with thread of gold, two-cornered hats, and swords...clothing that Salis had found in junk shops and Flea markets.

Salis had a fortuitous encounter at the Grand Pinte shortly after he had opened his Chat Noir. It was there that a friend introduced him to Emile Goudeau, the former chief of a literary circle known as les Hydropathes, (the taste for water or drink, the favorite past-time of the association) which was a pun created on the author's name Goudeau, (goutte d'eau). Salis soon learned that they had just lost their home in a small café-restaurant in the Latin Quarter. Salis extended a warm welcome to his cabaret, and soon after, the entire Hydropathe group was lured to the hills of Montmartre where it re-established itself in the Chat Noir. Goudeau and his Club des Hydropathes included over 500 poets, musicians, painters, monologuists, and other literary types. They all possessed certain common threads that bonded them together: antibourgeois, unconventional, contemptuous of the present Establishment, defiant of the traditions, and yearning to discard old bonds and conventions. They sought support and strength among persons of similar ideas who wished to identify themselves on a familiar terrain. They were very much a part of the spirit and style of the late nineteenth century Latin Quarter, its people, its ambience. They were the observers of the city, its sounds, and sights. This stroke of luck for Salis and Goudeau's followers contributed to a blend of artistry, association, and commercial wealth for the Chat Noir. Although Rodolphe's aim was to attract the "arty" public, the cabaret was soon the nightly haven for the greater public as well, seeking distraction and amusement, and gaining insights into a world of which they knew little.

The new cabaret won fame which spread beyond the limits of Montmartre. The public now included foreign dignitaries, statesmen, the fashionable, and even some of the curious bourgeois, the source of much of the cabaret humor. Salis' foremost thought was to accommodate the contemporary Parisian artistic community; however, if space permitted, he allowed to enter the general public, who considered itself fortunate to be admitted. The guests were greeted at the door with courtly reverences and long-winded, fantastic titles. It is amusing and interesting that at the time when the Third Republic was gaining respectability and popularity, the guests were greeted with a royal salutation. When members of the Parisian Establishment ventured in, they were greeted with insults and degrading interjections. The actors and singers unceasingly mocked, jeered, and insulted society, politicians, and the rich. The more tolerant snobs loved it.

Salis conceived a cabaret (like the Chat Noir) where the ambience would set fertile ground and germination for the Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art--the "new" art that would combine the verbal, visual, musical and choreographical aspects.[1] Efforts were being sought to achieve a meaningful merge of the arts, potentially breaking away from the narrow confines of the conventional and traditional. The Chat Noir---hospitable, casual, informal---encouraged the artists to accept the cabaret as their own, where they could meet, exchange ideas, discuss their art, savor their own company and perform according to their whims.[2] With the acceptance of the Chat Noir the various clients converted the Chat Noir into a true cabaret artistique, Salis' dream.

Less than a year after the cabaret had opened, the circle of artists began to publish its own weekly magazine named after the Chat Noir. Salis assumed the role as director of the journal. Goudeau served as editor-in-chief. The magazine appeared every Saturday; it was sold at the modest price of 15 centimes. The title page was identified with a huge black cat, tail high, head cocked, with Montmartre and its windmills in the background. The magazine soon became a familiar sight and a popular purchase at the Parisian cafés and numerous kiosks. In addition to literary compositions, songs, poetry, and satirical sketches by the contemporary writers, Le Chat Noir also carried occasional articles about events in Montmartre of which it considered itself to be the prime reporter. It expressed the spirit and the warm ties of the bohemian camaraderie. The success of the magazine and of the cabaret exceeded the aspirations of its founder.

Under Goudeau's inspiration the habitués of the Chat Noir established literary Fridays and Saturdays when writers could read works and poetry, literary Absinthes held on Wednesdays, and a monthly dinner held at a neighborhood restaurant[3] where the cabaret's supporters enjoyed eating, drinking and reciting. Many of the works appeared in the journal. Among those contributors were Charles Cros, Emile Goudeau, Marie Krysinka, Alphonse Allais, Jean Moréas, Rodolphe Salis, Aristide Bruant, also the works of Baudelaire, and Verlaine. Toulouse-Lautrec also contributed to the journal words and song, as he had begun his career as a cabaret chansonnier at the Chat Noir.

Another attraction at the Chat Noir was that of the chansonnier. The chanson was a common expression of French life, dating back to the Medieval Ages; however, there was a decline of this genre between the end of the Second Empire and the decade of the 1880's.[4] With the establishment of the Chat Noir there was a revival of the chanson. The chanson was traditional at the café-concert and at the variétés music halls, where there were also dances, dramatic skits, comic monologues, etc. These establishments were usually found along the city's boulevards, and attracted mostly middle and lower-class denizens. With a renewed interest in popular culture toward the fin-de-siècle, there was also a new generation of singers who brought the chanson to a new point of notariety. They preferred songs of deep social concern: the darker, uglier, and more tragic aspects of Parisian life; (contemporary poverty, homelessness, social injustice, crime and prostitution, abuse of the young and old).[5] Jules Jouy and Maurice Mac-Nab became star names that attracted other singers and a growing public to the cabaret. Maurice Donnay, a popular writer and dramatist, soon joined the entourage of the Chat Noir. Léon Xanrof, pseudonym for Fourneau, performed chansons of every day Paris and his native Montmartre.

Whatever the popularity of the above singers and many others, none ever achieved the grandiose, magnetic fame of Aristide Bruant. Named the "modern François Villon" and praised by Anatole France, Marcel Schwob, and Maurice Barrès, he was destined to become the darling of the Parisian cabaret. He had already gained reputation at the café-concerts with a singer, Nimi, and later at the cafés Epoque, Horloge, and Scala. At the Scala he appeared in a costume that was to become his trademark: A suit of black corduroy and broad-brimmed hat, a red flannel shirt, a scarlet scarf, and black leather boots, draped by a black, flowing cape around his broad shoulders. His height, robustness, and his red hair completed the captivating image that Toulouse-Lautrec was to eventually immortalize. Jules Jouy brought Aristide Bruant to the Chat Noir in January, 1884. His success was permanent; later, he was the main attraction for over ten years at his own cabaret, Le Mirliton.

The Chat Noir changed location only once from 1881 to 1885. The need to change location was due to three basic reasons: the need of more space to accommodate the crowds at the growing, popular rendez-vous; the disadvantageous approximity to the Elysée Montmartre dance hall which offered competition and attracted another clientele, and finally, the undesirable publicity, resulting from a fracas between Salis and local pimps, and the stabbing death of a waiter who came to the aid of Salis. Consequently, on the night of June 10, 1885, between 11:00 P.M. and midnight, Salis and his followers departed in grand style from 84 Boulevard Rouchechouart and moved to 12 Rue de Laval, now Rue Victor-Massé. In stark contrast to the deep mourning, and mammoth, solemn funeral procession in honor of the revered Victor Hugo in Paris proper, the cabaretists sang, marched, and danced, while carrying furniture and decor down the boulevards to the new Chat Noir: the Swiss Guards in full costume, followed by Salis in his prefect's costume, two hunters carrying the banner of the Black Cat and its insignia, 'Montjoye et Montmartre' and others filed by, frolicking, boisterous, torch-lit procession, while musicians played the minuette. It was truly a master stroke of publicity! After all the entourage and the observers had sung the joyous g
Marseillaise, the new Chat Noir opened its doors and re-claimed its many habitués.

The new establishment offered three floors of hospitality: truly a medieval rustic manor. The cabaret resembled an atelier and gallery with paintings and murals covering the walls, with stained glass windows which added further color and beauty to the already rich interior of art and history. Salis named rooms and tiny passageways, la Salle des Etats (room of States), la Salle des Seigneurs (room of Sires), la Salle des Gardes (room of h
guards). The second floor contained the Office of the Archives, the Hall of the Colonies, the Print Room, the Board Room, the Chapel, the Secret Library, etc. The third floor could hold as many as a hundred guests.

The reception at the front door was the same as that at the first Chat Noir. From the front door to the table or the dining room the cabaret shared its illusions, masks, veneer, and superficiality with warm spontaneity between the audience and its players. It offered its festive fraternity and dissolved the rigid, social roles of the real outside world. Famous visitors during this period included Banville, Maupassant, Huysman, Edmond de Goncourt, Robert de Montesquiou, Toulouse-Lautrec, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, General Boulanger, and the Prince of Wales, under pseudonym.

One of the theatrical innovations of the second Chat Noir was that of the Théâtre d'Ombres, the shadow play. Henri Rivière conceived this art which put tout Paris into a state of wonder and fascination. It was a genre, conveying the true spirit of the cabaret, incorporating all phases of "art" to create a variety of effects. Rivière combined ingeniously shadow and light play, decor painted or superimposed on glass and paper, cut-outs and Japanese-style puppets. Originally developed by the ancient Chinese, the genre eventually passed to the East and crept into France, developing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The renewed interest in shadow shows during the fin-de-siècle can be associated with the enthusiasm of the avant-gard for the minor art forms of theatre associated with popular culture, including puppet and marionette plays, pantomime, and the shadow show.

This type of miniature theatre could be easily adapted to the small stage of the typical cabaret. Rivière created a new setting by extinguishing the cabaret lights and then presented on miniature stage silhouettes of cardboard superimposed in front of a spot against a white napkin, while mimicking Jouy's songs. The innovation was so successful that Salis encouraged Rivière to produce more elaborate productions. The distinct art form was born. With

other colleagues Rivière developed more elaborate cut-outs of zinc and more impressive painted figures on glass panels. Productions became more ambitious, effects more dynamic, thus, an enhancement of the pictorial value of the presentation. Both music and human voice enhanced the total effect of the shadow play. Along with the development of techniques, visual and artistic, there was also an intense involvement in the composition of over forty shadow plays, of historical, dramatic, mystical, philosophical themes that were produced before the Chat Noir was sold. The shadow play was to outlive the Chat Noir, as its popularity and productivity spread to other establishments in Paris. Salis himself was to succumb March 17, 1897, while enthusiastically taking the shadow play on an ambitious, domestic and foreign tour.

The closing of the Chat Noir did not end the story of its existence. The first of several auctions of the cabaret property was held less than a month after Salis' death. Before Salis' death the cabaret followers had published chansons, stories, a guide of its furnishings, portfolios of prints and etchings and several other publications apart from the Chat Noir journal. Eventually the Musée de Montmartre was able to regain various property and holdings of the Chat Noir and add them to the museum's collection for the 1981 centennial celebration of the founding of the cabaret.

In a personal farewell to the cabaret, Alphonse Allais, the second editor-in-chief of the journal, wrote a piece entitled, Finis Chat Noir!

> "The 'Chat Noir' is dead! The cabaret closed; the theater, annihilated! The Chinese shadows vanished! The poets and singers, scattered! The journal, abolished!
>
> Something considerable is leaving us, and when I heard of the sale today of the last pictures, drawings, and other objets d'art that are going to be dispersed
>
> To the four winds, Sir, of public auctions,
> Something like a tear quivered on my old eyelashes.
> Ah! the 'Chat Noir,' the first 'Chat Noir,' the one on the Boulevard Rouchechouart!
> You are too young, my lads, to have known this marvelous dive." Alphonse Allais
> Oeuvres posthumes, 2:344

The Chat Noir had the distinction of being the first cabaret to inspire cabaret fanaticism that swept across Europe. In Paris itself it enjoyed the unsurpassed longevity of any cabaret of its period. Having opened its doors in November, 1881, it closed them in 1897, after sixteen years of brilliant, inspiration and notariety, with a widely sought journal that enjoyed thirteen continuous, productive years. It was the same year that Rodolphe Salis died, two years after he had sold it to an unsuccessful proprietor.

When Salis had decided to change locations of his first Chat Noir, Aristide Bruant decided to remain behind and assume the direction of the old premises. He renamed the cabaret, Le Mirliton, (the Reed-pipe). As a stark contrast to the superficial refinement of the new Chat Noir, Aristide Bruant adopted the opposite: sparsely furnished with a minimum of furniture, benches, and chairs, a piano and a counter. The decor included eclectic pictures, posters, swords, and similar bric à brac, an intended sampling of working-class ambience, wit, and humour. From the moment a customer entered Le Mirliton, his attention was overwhelmed by the commanding presence of

Aristide and the abusive language. He treated them all with oppressive contempt. Once permitted into the cabaret after a degrading inspection at the closed door, he would show them a contemptible look, and greeted them with:

"Oh! la! la! Cett 'gueul', cet binette!
Oh! la! la! Cette 'gueul', qu'il a!

(Oh! la! la! What a mug, what a phiz!
Oh! la! la! What a mug it is!)

Once the clients had overcome a shock or had retorted,[7] he would chase them off to some available spot. The reception was more or less in the spirit of the cabaret and meant to set the tone in good fun.

His cabaret was one of initial provocation and audience insult. Once oriented, the guests loved it. While the Chat Noir created "le bon ton", Le Mirliton created an atmosphere of "gutterization." Bruant claimed that his attitude toward his clients was his revenge for his past problems. Whereas they laughed because they thought he was joking, he claimed that he was not joking. This was the formula for commercial success; the more he mocked his patrons, the more they loved it and came back for more humiliation and insults. But for all the declared contempt for the middle classes, Bruant's stance was contrived to impress the public and fit in with the spirit of his songs. His desire to shock was in tune with other artists of the time.

Bruant's songs were written in the argot of the working class. Whether his melodies expressed bitter, trivial, humorous, or brutal sentiments, they always remained vivid, sincere, simple, poignant, and truthful. When persons came to hear Bruant, they were not seeking a message,[8] but rather to hear about the "other side" from an authentic observer. At an early age he had set out to learn the expression of the people of the streets: vagabonds, pimps, ruffians, prostitutes, and petty vendors. This was the colorful, lively, brutal, cynical language enriched with powerful metaphor and interjections. He noted down and memorized. When he made his debut in the café-concert, he had already absorbed the rich, slangly language and began incorporating it into his songs. His metallic, loud, cutting voice augmented his impressive, physical, towering appearance, while he was walking back and forth, stomping and waving his arms in dramatic interpretation. At Le Mirliton he remained the principal attraction with his accompanist and two substitute singers. From the time he opened his cafe, Bruant edited his own newspaper, also named Le Mirliton which was sold at the cabaret. It contained his own works and was filled with other poems, music, cartoons, and stories.

Despite his adherance to the victims of the dregs of society, he kept his distance from the poor. Bruant did not seek lower class subjects out of a political interest or instinct, but rather with a romantic, artistic attraction for this world-- the sub-culture of brutality and animalistic survival-- that was created by modern life. The former friend and police official, Oscar Méténier, wrote: "The characteristic of Bruant's particular success is that he has known how to make himself the idol of the poor and at the same time gain the acceptance of the others, the highly placed people and those he calls les fins-de-siècle. He has on his side both the oppressors and the oppressed."[9] Having soared in popularity, Aristide decided to go on tour in 1895; consequently, he turned the direction of his cabaret over to his pianist, Marius Herbochon, who changed the name to Cabaret Aristide Bruant. Bruant, himself, never returned to manage his first cabaret. After managing the Epoque, and then experiencing a loss in the political arena in politics, he accepted to do a concert in Paris. A grand success! He died shortly after in Paris on February 25, 1925.

The Montmartre world of the Chat Noir and Le Mirliton attracted its clients with an unusual mixture of elements: undefinable political passions, sensual abandon, or metaphysical anxiety. The two establishments were trying to act as a catalyst for the release of emotions and sentiments that had been repressed or limited in the present-day bourgeois life. Here Bohemia was a realm of liberated fantasy: either a theater of exaggerated respect at the Chat Noir or a disguise of dry humor after the initial, aggressive denunciation of Bruant at Le Mirliton. Both attitudes and approaches offered a challenge to the power of humor.

The successive Montmartrian cabarets that were born from the two discussed here were a new departure in the history of Bohemia. This was the Bohemia for which the bourgeoisie left behind the organized life of the modern city below, and sought release from ordinary social boundaries and attachments. Bohemia had succeeded in establishing an unparalleled relationship with bourgeois life. "It was such a desire that the cabarets of the fin-de-siècle both exploited and fulfilled."10

Typical Songs of Three Popular Singers

One of the many typical songs of Jouy from the "Chansons d'hiver" ("Songs of Winter") is the one in which he portrays the wretchedness of urban poverty, and the poor and homeless who wait for the day of reckoning with defiance and hope:

"Bah! Why should I pity myself! My lodgings
Are full of riches! Everything's just like yours,
With doors and windows, only it so happens
That the doors and windows are those of other people.
And later, after everything, when I'm weary,
Donning my hat like a roof,
The pavement serves me as a mattress
And the blowing wind as a blanket."

Harold B. Segel,
Turn-of-the-Century Cabaret, 39

Xanrof's chansons enjoyed great popularity, as they were witty, incisive, and lighthearted as he was. Here he turns infidelity into a whimsical surprise, ending without morality.

"A horse drawn coach was making its way down the street at a trot...
It was yellow in color and its coachman was white.
Behind the lowered blinds...
Kisses could be heard.
And afterwards a voice saying, Léon...
You're hurting me; take off your pince-nez!"
An old man who happened to pass by at the time...
Exclaimed: 'Why I could swear that it's
My wife's voice I hear!'
And he banged his walking stick down on the pavement.
But he slipped on the wet ground..
And smack, went down on his butt!
A woman then got out of the coach and said..
'Oh, oh, Léon, it's my husband!
We'd best hide!
...Give the coachman a hundred sous!"

Ibid., 46-47

Bruant's songs were often sinewy and starkly realistic. Bruant expressed concern for the plight of children living in poverty and crime. The theme of the disintegration of family ties occurs often in his songs. Here he relates that children do not often know their paternal or fraternal ties, and often become the pimps of their sisters:

"It's me who's the natural pimp,
Of my sister,
Who's the friend of little Cécile,
In Belleville,
Who's "looked after" by her big brother,
Who's called Eloi Constant,
Who never knew his old man,
In Ménilmontant.
My sister's with Eloi,
Whose sister's with me.
In the evening along the boulevard,
I palm her off on somebody,
In Belleville.
This way I don't make out too bad at all,
And my dear brother does as well,
Since he peddles my sister Thérèse,
In Ménilmontant."

Ibid., 60-61

Projection Views:
a. Riding in the Blois de Boulogne; b. 1889, The Tour Eiffel with view of Trocadéro; c. The Paris Slums: Rue de Bierre; d. Exterior view of The Original Chat Noir; e. Poster by Steinlen, advertising the Chat Noir; f. Aristide Bruant as immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec; g. The Chat Noir artistic interior; h. Rodolphe Salis in the Salle de Conseil; i. The Chat Noir during a Shadow Play by Caran d'Ache; j. Sketch of dramatic Salis as a speaker during a Shadow Play; k. Le Mirliton with original theme of Black Cat; l. Le Mirliton weekly newspaper with words from a Bruant chanson.

FOOTNOTES

1 Harold B. Segel, Turn-of-the-Century Cabaret, 20.
2 Ibid., 21. 3 Ibid., 24. 4 Ibid., 35. 5 Ibid., 36. 6 Ibid., 48.
7 Raymond, Rudorff, The Belle Epoque: Paris in the Nineties, 76.
8 Ibid., 79.
9 Seigel, Jerrold. Bohemian Paris, Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830 - 1930, 238.
10 Ibid., 241.

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